

13 May 1979

OR915ALT

How 'Swing' Senators Cope With Treaty

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 12 — On Thursday morning, Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spent three hours in a secure, soundproof room on Capitol Hill listening to a secret briefing from Senate staff members. The subject was one that concerns a lot of people here these days — whether the United States has the ability to monitor a strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union.

On Wednesday, Senator William V. Roth Jr. and several colleagues had lunch with Paul C. Warnke, formerly the chief arms negotiator. The subject, again, was the treaty, what it contains and how it can be verified.

Senators Biden and Roth both represent Delaware, one of the smallest states, but their votes loom large as the Senate begins debate on the treaty. Both are undecided, part of a group of about 25 swing votes that will probably determine the fate of the treaty when it comes up for ratification.

Roth's Interest in Tax Reduction

The two legislators make an interesting contrast. Mr. Roth, 57 years old, is a conservative Republican. His major interest is tax reduction; in foreign affairs he has played a minor role so far. Mr. Biden, 36, is a moderate Democrat and one of the few senators to sit on both the Foreign Relations and Intelligence Committees. As chairman of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Europe, he will play a major role in the debate, particularly as it relates to the West European allies.

But each Senator casts only one vote. Each has unanswered questions about the treaty; each is making an effort to learn about the subject, and each is sometimes confused at the answers.

"Sometimes I wonder if the people I hear are talking about the same treaty: the differences are so sharp," Senator Roth said.

In February, he organized a group of 15 colleagues, from both sides of the aisle, who were uncommitted, and wanted to study the strategic arms limitation treaty. Mr. Warnke was one of a half-dozen speakers who have addressed the group so far. Future speakers will include Henry A. Kissinger, the former Secretary of State.

The Problem of Getting the Facts

"One of the most difficult problems in Congress," said Senator Roth, who has served in Washington since 1966, "is to establish the facts, not just on SALT, but on any problem."

So far, he has not been subject to much lobbying pressure. But he did receive a call Thursday from Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's national security adviser, saying that the arms agreement had been completed.

Senator Roth starts with a bias in favor of arms control and says, "I want SALT to succeed." His biggest concern is that the American missile force will soon be vulnerable to Soviet attack, and that the strategic balance will thus be upset.

Accordingly, one question in his mind is whether the United States will couple the arms treaty with an expansion of military spending in other areas. "What does the Administration intend to do with respect to restoring the strategic balance?" the Senator asked. "Are they willing to propose programs and expend funds for a strong defense?"

Another critical point for him is the verification of treaty provisions. "I'm not willing to rely on the Soviets, and we don't have on-site inspection," he said. "I want to know what the implications are from the loss of our stations in Iran as well as Taiwan."

In a survey of his constituents, Senator Roth found that 71 percent favored

an arms agreement that enhanced American security, but he does not think that public opinion should play an important role in his decision.

"I've always said that, on a security issue that is this complex, the people of Delaware basically want me to exercise my best judgment," he said.

As for Senator Biden, he started in January to set up briefings for himself that have taken 30 hours of his time so far. They have included West European visitors, from West Germany's Defense Minister to a French correspondent, and he is planning a tour of Western Europe this summer that will concentrate on the treaty issue.

As a member of the Foreign Relations committee, Mr. Biden gets red carpet treatment from the White House on this issue, and he was one of about 20 senators invited to talk with the President on Thursday evening. He describes himself as "favorably disposed" toward the agreement, but several doubts remain in his mind.

Distrust of Soviet Avowed

Like many senators, he worries about monitoring. "I don't trust Soviet intentions any further than I can throw the desk I'm sitting at," Senator Biden said, "and consequently, verification takes on a major practical role."

He also wants to make sure that West Europeans support the treaty, even if it may mean greater pressure from Soviet conventional forces in Europe.

Senator Biden senses that one price for ratification will be a Senate demand for greater defense spending, and that bothers him.

"I don't believe the treaty can be passed, absent a commitment by the Administration to upgrade our conventional military capabilities," he said. "And I'm going to have to examine whether I believe the trade-off will be worth it. My arms control instincts may go against that."